

The terrible and strange death of Nick Berg

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The terrible death of Nick Berg in Iraq—beheaded in front of a video camera—has taken place in such strange and suspicious circumstances that it raises deeply troubling questions. Among them is whether American agencies had a direct or indirect hand in the young man's murder.

Questions immediately arise from the timing and political consequences of his killing. At the height of a massive scandal engulfing the Bush administration, Berg's death has been exploited by the American government and the US media to launch a counter-offensive against the revelations of systematic US torture in Abu Ghraib and other Iraqi prisons. A wholesale attempt is being made to shift American and international public opinion away from the outrage over the criminal character of the US occupation of Iraq and behind the self-serving argument that American forces are needed in Iraq to prevent the country descending into barbarism and chaos.

Were Berg's murderers being directly paid by the American government, they could not have performed a more timely service for the Bush White House.

Berg's killing was carried out in the name of al-Qaeda-aligned Jordanian terrorist Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. Whoever is operating in the name of Zarqawi, they have a proven record of provocative actions that have only helped to prop up the American occupation of Iraq.

On February 9, amid signs that the majority Iraqi Shiite population was on the verge of joining the armed resistance being fought mainly in Sunni Muslim areas, a letter was made public, allegedly authored by Zarqawi, calling for Sunnis to provoke a civil war with the Shiites. American officials used the letter to argue that their occupation was the only thing holding Iraq's religious groups apart. Several weeks later, on March 2, suicide bombings at Shiite mosques in Karbala and Baghdad were blamed on what the US now calls the "Zarqawi network."

Contrary to the schema outlined by US officials and in Zarqawi's letter, the bulk of the Iraqi masses spurned sectarianism. The growing unity has been on display in mass demonstrations and joint struggle since the eruption of a Shiite uprising in early April. Even before the torture revelations, the US occupation of Iraq had crumbled into a

morass of bloody reprisals against the Iraqi people and growing American casualties. Opposition has been steadily growing in the US and internationally.

The group who carried out the beheading of Berg and then ensured it was broadcast around the globe must have known that it would horrify American and world public opinion and assist the efforts at damage control in Washington.

Further questions are raised by the attempts of the US government to conceal or distort what it knew about Berg himself and the events leading up to his disappearance in Baghdad on April 10. Berg vanished in Iraq just 72 hours after being released from 13 days in US military custody and questioning by the FBI.

Berg has been described by his family and friends as adventurous. He had a limited knowledge of Arabic and an interest in obtaining reconstruction contracts in Iraq for the family telecommunications company, Prometheus Methods Tower Service. In December 2003 he travelled to Iraq and went home on February 1. Among the places the young man inquired for contract work was the Abu Ghraib prison—which he referred to as a "notorious prison for army and political prisoners." He returned to Iraq in mid-March.

CBS News revealed yesterday that the young man had been on the FBI's books for at least two years. In 2002, he was interviewed as part of the investigations into the September 11 terror attacks, over the fact his computer password had been used by alleged al-Qaeda terrorist Zaccarias Moussaoui. According to Berg's family, the FBI was reportedly satisfied the password was obtained during a brief encounter on a bus, when Nick Berg had allowed an acquaintance of Moussaoui to use his computer.

On March 7, the pro-Bush website FreeRepublic.com published a list of "enemies" who were opposing the US occupation of Iraq. Among the names, taken from a public list of people who had endorsed a planned March 20 antiwar demonstration on the website of the group ANSWER, was Michael Berg—Nick's father—and the name of the Berg family company. Such information would be entered into the databases of US intelligence agencies as well.

Berg was seized on March 24, within one week of returning to Iraq, and held incommunicado without charges

in a Mosul prison for unspecified “suspicious activities.” His parents in Philadelphia were visited by the FBI on March 31 and asked why their son was in Iraq. Berg reported being interviewed at least three times during his detention by FBI agents and asked whether he had constructed pipe bombs or had visited Iran. He was released on April 6 only after his family filed a federal court case against the US government the day before for illegal imprisonment.

Dan Senor, the Coalition Provisional Authority spokesman in Iraq, claimed this week that Berg had never been detained by US forces, only by Iraqis. This has been exposed to be a lie. Berg’s family has produced an email from Beth A Payne, a US consular official in Iraq, dated April 1. Payne wrote: “I have confirmed that your son, Nick, is being detained by the US military in Mosul... He was picked up approximately one week ago.”

The chief of the Iraqi police in Mosul has also publicly rejected the claim that Berg was detained by his command. He told a press conference on May 13: “The Iraqi police never arrested the slain American. Take it from me... that such reports are baseless.”

After his release, Nick Berg travelled to Baghdad. His family last heard from him on April 9, when he reported he was looking to leave Iraq via Kuwait as soon as it was safe enough. They have indicated Berg told them he was wary of trying to fly out to Jordan on the grounds it was too dangerous. At the time, much of Baghdad was engulfed in heavy fighting. Large parts of the city, including the roadways leading to the airport, were under constant attack by the Iraqi resistance and Westerners and Japanese had been taken hostage by various groups.

The last alleged contact with Berg by a US official was on April 10. A State department spokesperson told CBS an American diplomat offered to arrange a flight for him to Jordan. He allegedly refused and restated his intention to travel to Kuwait. His hotel has reported he left early on April 10, saying he intended to be back within a few days.

If the American government is to be believed, no US agency then took any further interest in his activities or well-being until it was apparent he had disappeared. No satisfying answers have been given to obvious questions. Were Berg’s movements in Iraq being monitored by American intelligence? Why was he detained and on whose orders? Was he under surveillance after he was released on April 6? If he was, how did he come to be kidnapped in the centre of Baghdad?

Throughout this week, Berg’s father Michael has repeatedly denounced the Bush administration for complicity in his son’s death. He told Boston radio station WBUR on Tuesday: “[W]hat cost my son his life was the fact the US government saw fit to keep him in custody for

13 days without any of due process or civil rights and released him when they were good and ready. It goes further than Donald Rumsfeld. It’s the whole Patriot Act, it’s the whole feeling in this country that rights don’t matter any more because there are terrorists about. Well in my opinion ‘terrorist’ is just another word like ‘communist’ or ‘witch’ and it’s a witchhunt and this whole administration is just representing something that is not America.”

Yesterday, he told Philadelphia radio: “My son died for the sins of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld. This administration did this.” He has also demanded to know whether “it is true that al-Qaeda offered to trade my son’s life for another person,” as is alleged in the video-tape statement of Nick Berg’s killers.

The issues being raised by Michael Berg point to the fact, that at best, the US authorities created the conditions in which his son could be kidnapped by extremists and killed.

The more disturbing possibility that arises from all the evidence that is known is that Berg’s disappearance and subsequent killing was the work of US agencies or pro-US Iraqi factions. One month after he disappeared, Berg was murdered at the most opportune moment for the US government.

Anyone who believes it is unthinkable or outrageous to suggest that the American government would sanction having one of its citizens murdered to shore up its fortunes is underestimating the political situation.

The Bush administration and elements of the American military hierarchy, media and corporate establishment are indictable war criminals. They ordered, directed, propagated or have profited from a criminal war, in flagrant violation of international law. The year since the US-led invasion of Iraq has been marked by further war crimes and atrocities. For significant sections of the American ruling class, everything depends upon preventing opposition to the occupation of Iraq within the American and international working class from developing into a conscious movement for political and social change. To them, the life of 26-year-old Nick Berg would have meant nothing.



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